

Georgia State University
ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

English Theses

Department of English

8-8-2017

**“I AM THE JONESES!”: DECONSTRUCTING
CLASS PERFORMATIVITY AND IDENTITY
FORMATION IN BRAVO’S THE REAL
HOUSEWIVES OF ATLANTA**

Shari L. Arnold

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_theses

Recommended Citation

Arnold, Shari L., "“I AM THE JONESES!”: DECONSTRUCTING CLASS PERFORMATIVITY AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN BRAVO’S THE REAL HOUSEWIVES OF ATLANTA." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2017.
http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_theses/223

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.

“I AM THE JONESES!”: DECONSTRUCTING CLASS PERFORMATIVITY AND
IDENTITY FORMATION IN BRAVO’S *THE REAL HOUSEWIVES OF ATLANTA*

by

SHARI L. ARNOLD

Under the Direction of R. Scott Heath, PhD

ABSTRACT

The struggle for cultural intelligibility can be clearly articulated through intersections between race, class, and socioeconomic status. Judith Butler demystifies the societal symbols responsible for denoting gender through a discussion of a stable “reality” in relation to performativity. When superimposed over Butler’s gender work, class stratifications and their relevance to cultural intelligibility reflect similar concerns presented in Butler’s work. In this work, I argue that through subversive use of black female archetypes presented by Patricia Hill Collins, strategic language, and flamboyant displays of tangible wealth, characters on Bravo’s *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* consciously perform class to resist the policing of social boundaries and to highlight their position within liminal social spaces. However, as a result of their performativity, these women violate the liminal space by patrolling class boundaries from within their social circle.

INDEX WORDS: reality television, identify, performativity, RHOA, African American
literature, cultural studies

“I AM THE JONESES!”: DECONSTRUCTING CLASS PERFORMATIVITY AND
IDENTITY FORMATION IN BRAVO’S *THE REAL HOUSEWIVES OF ATLANTA*

by

SHARI L. ARNOLD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2017

Copyright by
Shari Lakia Arnold
2017

“I AM THE JONESES!”: DECONSTRUCTING CLASS PERFORMATIVITY AND
IDENTITY FORMATION IN BRAVO’S *THE REAL HOUSEWIVES OF ATLANTA*

by

SHARI L. ARNOLD

Committee Chair: R. Scott Heath

Committee: Gina Caison

Paul Schmidt

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

August 2017

DEDICATION

To my mom, Rachel: may this work embody the love, strength, and courage you've helped me know for myself, and may it reflect your dedication to my success.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

May the Most High God forever remain the Alpha and Omega of every endeavor I ever pursue. Without His guidance and protection, nothing I do will succeed. To that extent, His love created the most sacred of relationships between two human beings: mother and daughter. My mother's quiet strength and steadfast determination are critical reasons why this project exists. Thank you, Mom, for never giving up on me. Thank you for always believing in me. I am forever indebted, in love, to you.

Daddy: your intellect far exceeds anything the greatest Oxford scholar could comprehend, and I respect that most about you. Our sporadic intellectual conversations reflect the pride I know you take in my work; I appreciate your love and support. Grandma, I miss you, and I know you're right here with me. These pursuits, I hope, honor the legacy you left behind for us. My extended family and close loved ones—through so many kind words, thoughts, and gestures—have supported me throughout this amazing journey, and I value your encouragement.

To my committee members, Drs. Scott Heath, Gina Caison, and Paul Schmidt: I am grateful for your dedication to this project and my academic advancement. Each of you encouraged me to follow my interests, and your support is the reason why I stayed with this work. Dr. Heath, I admire your commitment to exploring the intricacies of academia next to African-American pop culture and hope to one day challenge my students the way you've challenged me. Dr. Caison, your passion for uncovering the story of the marginalized/oppressed/second-class citizen motivates me to pursue my own passion; thank you for helping me think through so many different decisions. Dr. Schmidt, your experience in this profession and pragmatic approach to academia remind me of the reason I started this journey; thank you for investing in my growth.

Dr. Griselda Thomas saw something in me that I didn't see in myself, and she always affirms who I am. You taught me an intense love for my blackness and femininity that completely transformed my perspective. Thank you for edifying me. Dr. Ashley Shelden taught me to look beyond the surface for the complexity hidden in the details, and your continued mentorship so far removed from undergraduate seminars keeps me grounded in that which I know.

Shay, Jamial, Shermaine, Ann, K'Lia, Ryan, Kimara, Racquel, Xavier, Jay, Keith, Ebony, Brittany, and Minki. Every conversation, every prayer, every act of love kept me from giving it all up. You've read papers, listened to ideas, wiped tears and celebrated all the victories I've encountered. I need each one of you, and each of you is a reflection of me. Your love is the best part of being your sister. We're getting closer to the finish line!

This work was birthed from the desire to contradict the norm, and I hope to widen the space where we all sit down to examine the complexity of difference. May peace and blessings manifest from every lesson learned.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | V |
| 1 “IMAGE IS EVERYTHING IN ATLANTA”: INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| 2 “ATLANTA IS NEW MONEY”: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK | 12 |
| 2.1 The Social Construction of Reality, Berger and Luckmann | 12 |
| 2.2 Gender Identity Formation, Judith Butler | 16 |
| 2.3 Representations of Black Women, Patricia Hill Collins | 19 |
| 2.4 Foundations: <i>RHOA</i> Structure and Development | 21 |
| 3 “IN ATLANTA, MONEY AND CLASS DO GIVE YOU POWER”: SHOW | |
| CRITIQUE AND PERFORMANCE EVALUATION | 29 |
| 3.1 Mammies, Matriarchs, and Public Images of Black Women | 29 |
| 3.2 The Rich Bitch and Her Friends | 35 |
| 4 “I SAID WHAT I SAID!”: CONCLUSION | 41 |
| WORKS CITED | 45 |

LIST OF TABLES

| | |
|--|----|
| Table 1 “Real Housewives Viewership” | 22 |
|--|----|

1 “IMAGE IS EVERYTHING IN ATLANTA”: INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores portrayals of Black women on reality television docusoaps, which are programs that combine fact-based elements from documentaries with fictional narratives from soap operas, to interrogate how these women construct their identities and to examine how these identities affect their social mobility. Specifically, I argue that through the subversive use of traditional Black female archetypes present in literature and television, characters on Bravo’s first predominantly-black program, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (2008 -) (*RHOA*) perform class to resist the policing of social boundaries and to highlight their position within a liminal social space. Integral to this conflict is a hierarchy that places members of the upper-class into positions of power. I question if power inhabits a stable position because the *RHOA* characters shift the classed hierarchical structure by collectively resisting mainstream society’s attempts to limit their social mobility. By interrogating reality, performance, and identity, my analysis highlights intersections between race and class that appear on *RHOA* and point to challenges women of color face as minority members in society at large.

In 2006, *The Real Housewives* (2006 -) franchise debuted on Bravo in Orange County, California; since its inception, the show has been hosted by nine cities domestically and internationally.¹ In 2008, as a spinoff of the network’s original series, the show debuted in Atlanta. The general premise of the program, regardless of its location or the race of its participants, follows this format: a small group of women who are affiliated with the affluent members of their community invite the viewing public to see how the wealthy live. Michael J. Lee and Leigh Moscovitz purport that the show is about “rich women” and their “lives lived in

¹ *The Real Housewives* has filmed in these additional locations: D.C., Miami, Dallas, New Jersey, Potomac, New York City, Beverly Hills, Cheshire, London and Melbourne, Australia. Other international locations include Athens, Greece, Vancouver and Toronto, Canada, but these programs are not affiliated with the Bravo network.

luxury's lap," and their day-to-day happenings usually include the responsibilities of wife and mom, socializing with their friends (both cast members and non-cast members), discussions about business ventures, and gossip about their fellow castmates (65). The show's production inconspicuously emphasizes the luxuries of life as a *housewife* by consistently showing the castmates' massive estates, the locations of their extravagant shopping trips, their top-of-the-line vehicles, and their midday meetings in posh dining establishments.² Most troubling is that the shows seem to be more about life as a rich woman and less about the intersections between their fabulous happenings and their lives as wives and mothers. However, these images are vital to *Real Housewives* because they promote the exclusivity inherent in the high-class stratifications of society, thus reinforcing the specific iterations that place these women into this social class. So, why choose Atlanta for the first Black cast? Though each installment of *Real Housewives* shares these characteristics, the Atlanta franchise does for Black women what other cities could not: Atlanta is the place to be for Black people in America.

My study derives from a statement made by Linnethia Monique Johnson, (in)famously known as "NeNe" Leakes. In the introductory reel of the show's first season, NeNe asserts that she creates the standard by which everyone else operates: "I don't keep up with the Joneses; I *am* the Joneses!" ("Welcome" 0:20). The Joneses named in this colloquial phrase represent a white family who has attained a certain level of social affluence, generally in the upper echelon of class stratifications. Other people mimic the Joneses' behaviors—usually in the forms of how and why they spend their money and with whom and where they socialize—in an attempt to present themselves within the same social class. So, from the very beginning of the show, viewers are

² "Housewife" and its variations shown in italics differentiates the specific reference of women on the show from the generic use of the word.

presented with the idea that at least one of the housewives understands the importance of cultural intelligibility and the necessity to verbalize her position within society.

The timing of this project reflects the need for updated models of Black women in literature and film, and it takes advantage of reality television's increasing popularity in mainstream culture. Though scholars consistently explore how audiences consume and interpret literary narratives, few have turned a critical eye to how newer forms of media imitate fictional narrative and provide complex social commentary.³ Moreover, many twentieth-century African American writers create Black female protagonists, but these characters often reflect antiquated representations typical of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century perceptions of Black women in America. These characters usually find themselves in major conflict with white counterparts in settings that reflect the master/slave and employer/employee relationships typical of nineteenth- and twentieth-century interactions between Black and white people. Though these models have previously helped us understand Black women's individual and collective identities, it is necessary to explore how these tropes have evolved and how they apply to twenty-first century African American women. Traditional archetypes of Black female characters appear in *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, but how they manifest on the show does not perfectly replicate the historical models. Reading *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* as a contemporary African American narrative text frames my analysis of the changes to traditional representations of Black

³ Daniel Beck's "Factual Entertainment and Reality TV" explores intersections between commodified culture and reality television viewership, while Michael Essany's *Reality Check: The Business and Art of Producing Reality TV* provides a detailed breakdown of twelve reality television subgenres in order to discuss the how reality television production overrides the presentation of reality in these shows. Laura Grindstaf untangles the manifestations of characters' public and private emotions in "Reality Celebrity," and her study identifies characters as individuals separate from their television personas. In "Guilty Pleasures and Cultural Legitimation," Michael Wayne identifies viewers' collective interest in the lifestyles presented through high-class reality television and suggests that viewers feed an unconscious desire to experience these realities. These scholars provide insightful perspectives about reality television's cultural influence, but they limit or omit explicit discussion about the relationship between culture, race, class, and reality construction.

women in television, and it positions this research within current, ongoing conversations about Black female identities.

Most apparent in coverage of Bravo's *Housewives* franchises are the popular media outlets, magazines, and blogs that follow the characters' personal and professional happenings, but the stories lack critical, scholarly commentary on the shows and characters. Scholars who recognize these shows as texts through which one could explore social structures and their impact on society almost exclusively engage the predominantly white versions of the show and consistently take up discussions about the women's physical appearance, inappropriate behavior, and overindulgence in tangible wealth.⁴

Some, though, begin a useful critique of the characters' performances, despite the fact that they disregard the all-Black *RHOA* cast. For example, A.G. Gancarski questions how gender roles work in *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* (2010 -) and *The Real Housewives of New York* (2008 -). He uses an analysis of the castmates' language, positionality, and appearance to gauge their social relevance and investigate how femininity manifests throughout these two franchises. Gancarski argues—through an insult about New York housewife LuAnn D'Agostina's masculine looks—that the housewives' preoccupation with others' opinions about their appearance causes them to “make digs at each other's femininity or authenticity, and

⁴ Each of the following studies specifically addresses Bravo's reality television programs. Jane Feuer evaluates the quality of reality presented in Bravo's reality television shows, and Kavita Nayar looks at viewer response to the shift *housewives* make from public entertainers to globally-recognized brands in “You Did(N't) Build That.” Her work begins a useful conversation about self-awareness among viewers and show participants. “Affluencers’ by Bravo” introduces Erin Copple Smith's analysis of a phenomenon similar to that of Nayar, but Copple Smith examines multi-layered promotion as the agent responsible for Bravo's viewership. Nicole B. Cox's individual study “Banking on Females” and her joint work with Jennifer M. Proffitt—“The Housewives’ Guide to Better Living”—continue the investigation of viewership among Bravo's programming, but each one incorporates gender to discuss how women are linked to consumption. Racquel Gates' “Activating the Negative” emphasizes how these shows' depend on intentional production that prioritizes and instigates bad behavior, and Lauren Squires breaks down the necessity for reunion shows to reinforce viewers' positionality among the castmates as *housewives* and members of society at large. However, these studies do not isolate one specific Bravo reality television program and also stop short of interrogating the interplay between race, class, gender, and social hierarchy.

perhaps to shield themselves from such critiques, they embrace exaggerated versions of femininity” (21). Gancarski cloaks the performance aspect of this example in an evaluation of femininity, but he nonetheless identifies a key tenant of my argument: external pressure from the majority will influence how people behave for the sake of acceptance.

Lee and Moscovitz’s work on *The Real Housewives of New York City*, though it focuses on the happenings of an all-white cast, provides relevant comparisons to many behaviors prominent in *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. They use a discussion of “the Bravo wink” to describe reality’s instability, and they detail how this technique allows audience members the opportunity to enter the *Housewives* reality while also remaining stable within their own realities: “[Producers] wink at the audience when someone says, ‘I’m the healthiest person in the world’ and then you see them ashing their cigarette. We’re kind of letting the audience in on the fun” (68). The scholars use this instance to highlight moments of hypocrisy among castmates, but it also serves a greater purpose within my analysis. The Bravo wink helps articulate reality’s instability when viewed in conjunction with the docusoap reality television genre. Lee and Moscovitz also present an anti-feminine archetype, the “rich bitch,” and I will later use this to explain the sole white female castmate among the *RHOA* women.

Some research about *RHOA* specifically covers the housewives’ behavior but varies in its analysis of the social implications resulting from instances reflecting poor conduct. Kristen J. Warner records the performance of “ratchetness” and details trouble with codifying the word through multiple representations of its reach, but the definition she rests on is “excessive and hypervisible,” reflected in scenes featuring physical altercations on *RHOA* and other docusoaps (“They Gon’ Think” 130). Her guiding research question tackles a twofold issue with representation of women of color on television: underrepresentation and negative stereotypes.

Warner asserts that few leading Black women on syndicated sitcoms or dramas combined with cable television's insistence on perpetuating destructive images of Black women creates an identity crisis for women, like *RHOA*'s Porsha Williams, who recognize the harm caused by accepting undesirable portrayals but lack knowledge about "how to broaden [their characterizations]" ("They Gon' Think" 146).

Pier Dominguez uses "the money shot" to emphasize race at work in Bravo's housewife franchises, reminding the show's viewers that because the network situates *RHOA* within a structure designed to promote interests of white castmates, white network executives, white viewers, and white culture, the ways in which we read displays of Black femininity must be mitigated through an alternative viewing lens.⁶ The interplay between ratchetness (behavior typified by disregard for traditional social etiquette), identity, and public perception here nods toward the connection I make between social expectations and cultural intelligibility; we must view societal iterations of acceptable actions and attitudes from Black women—especially Black women on reality television shows—as the compass by which we navigate the women's identity formation processes. Though he chooses a "queer of color camp" as his viewing lens, Dominguez postures his argument toward the idea that individuals outside circles controlled by people of color maintain significant influence over how those within minority spaces function (157).⁸ In a similar fashion, I juxtapose the *RHOA* castmates against other all-white casts in and from predominantly white communities and use the show's original franchise to denote *RHOA* as

⁶ The money shot is a technique used in "film, video, television broadcast, or print publication that is disproportionately expensive to produce and/or is perceived as essential to the overall importance or revenue-generating potential of the work" (Patches 2013).

⁸ "Queer of Color Camp" references Dominguez's use of the collective perspective shared by individuals who identify as queer and members of a racial minority.

an African American text worthy of critical analysis both within and outside the mainstream context.

Adria Y. Goldman and Damion Waymer's study most closely matches my proposed undertaking in its methodology and structure, as they analyze docusoaps to determine how and why readers recognize Black women in reality television through traditionally negative stereotypes. Their work covers several shows—*Married to Medicine*, *Love & Hip Hop*, *Basketball Wives*, *SWV Reunited*—aired on various networks—Bravo, VH1, and TVOne, respectively. They isolate seasons during 2011 and 2014 from all the shows. Goldman and Waymer also explore traditional Black female archetypes as outlined by Patricia Hill Collins and discuss expansions of them through the “dizzy Black woman” and the “high class diva.” Their findings locate Black female identity at the center of conflict and performance entangled with social pressure to “be” a certain type of Black woman, and that type is really left to be determined; who makes that determination also remains irresolute. I incorporate Berger and Luckmann's idea that “individuals construct reality through their interaction and communication with each other” to demonstrate how “[r]oles and behaviors that become habitual are turned into patterns” which readers and castmates may consume as reality (60). Using this work helps answer the following of my research questions: can, [and if so, how] do docusoaps present an authentic, non-fictional reality?

Because this project is interdisciplinary in nature and no single theory will sufficiently contextualize my analysis within literary studies, I begin Chapter 1 by constructing a theoretical framework using texts from sociology, queer studies, and African American literary theory. And, rather than attempting to handle each respective theory in its entirety, I will provide a high overview of their major tenants and focus in on the aspects that directly relate to my analysis. My

aim here is to emphasize how societal perceptions of reality overlap with the manner in which we create, consume, and operate within texts produced as a result of these intersections.

Berger and Luckmann create the foundation for my theoretical framework, as their study defines reality based on location, time, and human interaction. According to these scholars, “the sociology of knowledge must concern itself with whatever passes for 'knowledge' in a society, regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of such 'knowledge'” (15). In a given society, a collective understanding of reality within a society will not only derive from ubiquitous decisions about the elements that construct the overarching reality, but universal understanding will also hinge upon the various ways that individual realities collide and fuse. Borrowing from Merton, Berger and Luckmann detail how “‘manifest' and 'latent' functions are applied to the sphere of ideation, [with] the distinction being made between the intended, conscious functions of ideas, and the unintended, unconscious ones” (23). This philosophy supports my later discussion of performance, hierarchy, and marginalization because the underpinning belief of this ideology posits that both prominent, intentional behaviors and recessive, inadvertent behaviors influence the way individuals understand and operate within their realities.

The next tenet of Chapter 1 identifies the types of performance delivered by *RHOA* castmates and related to the show in general by looking at Judith Butler’s presentation of gender binaries and social ideologies: specific rules, or “a series of cultural inferences,” regulate each side of the various binaries, and society polices gender based on this structure (100). It is gender performance that troubles the binary structure because reality shifts once a woman, for example, takes up behaviors and mannerisms society prescribes to men (and vice versa). The essence of Butler’s position emphasizes gender regulation and performativity as socially constructed

ideologies used as tools of oppression. My focus relies on performativity that creates normalized identities at the expense of the marginalized population. To effectively use performance theory in this analysis, I will replace gender and its complementary binaries (male/female and heterosexual/homosexual) with class and create a “haves/have-nots” binary to explicate the castmates’ performances. This theory connects social rules, identity formation, and performance to critique the indoctrinated ideologies that govern society’s expectations about social norms. Performance theory will also frame the details I emphasize about the housewives’ behaviors in relation to traditional Black female archetypes.

The final portion of my theoretical framework uses Patricia Hill Collins work with traditional stereotypes of Black women to explain mainstream society’s need for “othering” women of color: “mammy,” “matriarch,” “welfare mother,” “jezebel,” and “hoochie-mama.” I primarily discuss the mammy and matriarch in relation to the additional models presented through Goldman and Waymer and Lee and Moscovitz; I look at how the housewives dress, speak, and interact with people close to and distant from the show to illustrate how the characters expand and reform the stereotypes. Like Butler, who questions the role power plays in ostracizing the “other,” Hill Collins contends that “[b]ecause the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood” (69). Hill Collins offers invaluable analyses of the ways in which Black women are restricted through socially constructed positions designed to perpetuate social immobility. I use the similarities and differences between the archetypes and their reproductions on the show to demonstrate how the housewives resist class boundary supervision and gain agency within restrictive social classes. Blending these three distinct studies will help unfurl

questions about reality formation, including whether or not the show's viewers collectively agrees upon reality's defining features.

Chapter 1 also provides an overview of the *Real Housewives* franchise and explains the general concept of the show. I situate *RHOA* among its forerunner, *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, and the second spinoff created in 2008, *The Real Housewives of New York City*. I use the first franchise to discuss what viewers see each week, regardless of the show's location. Following this, I break down *RHOA* ratings to emphasize its popularity among viewers and validate its use as a primary text in this study. This franchise represents the most popular of all Bravo *Housewives* shows, averaging well over one million viewers since its inception. As reported by Charles Whitaker, I also briefly discuss Atlanta as "the crown jewel of the New South" related to social, political, and economic opportunities for African Americans (148). I argue that no other city could have hosted Bravo's first predominantly Black cast.

Much of Chapter 2 centers on archetypes and their manifestations on the show. Hill Collins explains how many scholars who study Black families and African American motherhood "portray African- American mothers as complex individuals who often show tremendous strength under adverse conditions, or who become beaten down by the incessant demands of providing for their families" (76). The *RHOA* castmates face a daunting task. While appearing on a television show, each woman must meet society's standards of upper-class decorum, maintain their households as wives and mothers, meet the network's expectations based on viewer demands, and consistently negotiate their different identities in multiple environments that prioritize whiteness. As tempting as it may be to discredit the notion of racial difference in 2017, my project later discusses how society fails to move beyond racial disparities. And, almost twenty-five years ago, Alice Walker informed the world of the difference between

universal women's struggles and those women of color face, stating, "Womanist is to feminist as lavender is to purple" (xii). Along this line, a portion of Chapter 2 outlines potential cultural and social applications for Kim Zolciak's appearance on the initial seasons of *RHOA*. I suggest that her role serves a dual but contradictory purpose. On one hand, she follows the subversive pattern set up by her castmates. On the other hand, because she cannot discard her race and the advantages associated with her whiteness, her position on the show ultimately illustrates the Black woman's difficulty with social mobility.

I conclude my thesis by exploring how the manipulation of the traditional Black female archetypes affect their positionality in society, with specific emphasis on how the housewives resist society's desire to exclude them from elite class groups. I am also interested in the duality of their identity formation. Consider how both the identities the housewives assume and the one the reading public assigns them may be viewed as one: the identities are mutually inclusive rather than being mutually exclusive. I invite readers to think about how the ideas in this discussion are at work in other texts because it is through the investigation of our familiar surroundings that we begin breaking down hierarchical structures and equalize the proverbial playing field for all people, regardless of race, gender, sexuality, or any other socially constructed ideologies used for oppressive purposes.

2 “ATLANTA IS NEW MONEY”: THEORETICAL FRAMWORK

2.1 The Social Construction of Reality, Berger and Luckmann

Berger and Luckmann present a blueprint for understanding how individuals construct, interpret, and engage with reality from both an individual and a collective perspective. They break their theory into three major parts: “The Foundation of Knowledge in Everyday Life,” “Society as Objective Reality,” and “Society as Subjective Reality.” From the onset, *reality* and *knowledge* are key definitions footing their study in the idea that from person to person, and from discipline to discipline, the meaning of each word can (and does) shift for the purpose deemed most suitable for the moment. However, they present two clear definitions. First, *reality* is defined as “a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent from our own volition,” and *knowledge* is, “the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics (13). Reality is characterized by the idea that individuals come to understand that occurrences within spaces they consistently frequent happen despite whatever influence they have on the event and/or its outcome. Knowledge, then, represents the relationship between the individual and the occurrences, insomuch as the individual eventually expects certain things to happen consistently and in a particular manner; she then relies on those events to validate that which she believes will happen.

Overall, their work examines how we create our realities based on the way we create routines from that which we consistently engage with spatially and temporally and how we account for the instances when multiple realities collide. At the core, what Berger and Luckmann investigate is how we take reality for granted because we make routines out of familiar behaviors and occurrences. They assert that we codify reality based on the series of events that we come to expect according to “the ‘here’ of [our bodies] and the ‘now’ of [our present]” (36). For example,

a college student expects to take specific classes on specific days of the week; those classes will be taught by the same professor every week, and everyone will gather in the same location for each class meeting. This sequence of events becomes problematic, according to Berger and Luckmann, when unexpected events interrupt the routine because individuals unconsciously close the space that allows them to tolerate that which does not align with their “here and now.” If the professor decides to hold class in a new location on a different day, does this mean the students’ reality doesn’t exist the way they think it does? Not so much. Because people know they live in “an intersubjective world,” or, “a world that [they] share with others,” this group of students can accept that their professor changed a component of that which they normalized and included in their reality, and they can therefore accept this alteration (37). Moreover, we are incorporating this “interruption” into our routine and thereby combining the unfamiliar with the familiar (another way to put this is that we accept a foreign occurrence better when we fold it into that which we’ve already established as a steadfast reality through concrete knowledge). When thinking about the docusoap, the social construction of reality becomes evident because the genre combines two distinct program types. The docusoap represents an incessant collision between the “here and now” and the “intersubjective world.”

In order to deconstruct the term *docusoap*, we must look at each root that creates the word. The *Real Housewives* franchise falls under reality television’s docusoap genre and blends together elements from both documentaries and soap operas. Soap operas are complex fictional stories that publicly display the private—and usually contentious—lives of numerous characters whose day-to-day happenings overlap with seemingly unrelated members of separate storylines. The *docu-* portion of the word, short for *documentary*, is defined as factual material recorded from real events with the purpose of disseminating educational or informative information

through literature or film. Similar to a soap opera, the docusoap's main characters frequent a number of locations, and most events occur within their homes; viewers experience the main characters' life events as they happen individually and in tandem with other characters; each episode builds the characters' storylines around the previous week's episode. It is the combination of *soap opera* and *documentary* that separates the docusoap from the other two and complicates preconceived notions about reality.

The foremost conclusion drawn from the docusoap's hybridity presents a foundation that assumes, to some degree, that what we see in *RHOA* is real. This hybridity is twofold, with each section relying on the other. First, we understand the "docusoap" as a fusion of two preexisting television genres: one that explicitly represents fiction and another that symbolizes factual, validated truth. The docusoap only works because the two genres work together. Also within this context, reality itself embodies hybridity. If "reality" is the summation of an individual's—or in this case, a viewer's—spatial and temporal "here and now," then the viewer's reality interacts with the reality put forth by the show. (And, further complicating things, each character exists within her personal reality that overlaps with her castmates' personal realities). Therefore, what viewers see when they watch *RHOA* is not simply a fictional story or a factual narrative.

Goldman and Waymer argue that reality television heavily influences social behavior, and they suggest that "reality television makes a false promise to present reality to its audiences" (52).¹⁰ However, this claim ignores the genre's inherent fictional nature stemming from its soap opera origins. Moreover, Berger and Luckmann assert that within the reality of everyday life, "other realities appear as finite provinces of meaning, enclaves within the paramount reality marked by circumscribed meanings and modes of experience" (39). In other words, individuals

¹⁰ Reality television here encompasses all genres, including the docusoap.

can tease out the difference between a constructed reality and the reality in which they exist, even when they are invited to participate in the constructed reality— which is created specifically to be fictional— as though it is an authentic environment. When we read fiction, we enter into the reality an author creates, and we engage the characters within that space according to the parameters outlined by the author. Readers often feel real emotions based on the sequence of events presented in the text, and readers talk about the characters like they know them. But, when a reader steps away from the text, he neither remains in the reality of the book’s narrative nor in limbo between that reality and his own.

Berger and Luckmann offer the following explanation for the consumption of performance in connection with reality:

The transition between realities is marked by the rising of the curtain... the spectator is ‘transported to another world’, with its own meanings and an order that may or may not have much to do with the order of [the spectator’s] everyday life. As the curtain falls, the spectator ‘returns to reality,’ ...to the paramount reality of everyday life by comparison with which the reality presented on the stage now appears tenuous and ephemeral. (39)

The literal “rising of the curtain” marks the figurative entrance into what the audience understands to be an alternate reality, and its fall marks the opposite. In each instance, viewers are invited into and ushered out of an environment that exists within the boundaries of the performance; and, if we extend Berger and Luckmann’s argument, inherent in the position of audience member is the choice to participate in this act and the knowledge that the show’s reality belongs within a specific time and space. Based on this premise, the assertion that reality television fails to do that which it undertakes limits the intellectual capacity of the audience. In

other words, it assumes that audience members cannot discern for themselves the difference between a fabricated reality and the ones in which they live.¹¹ So, rather than explicitly stating that reality television—especially the docusoap—attempts to present something real to its audiences, I suggest that docusoaps complicate the manner in which viewers interact with the shows’ realities, and the genre disrupts the normalized behaviors that viewers use to construct their own realities.¹² Berger and Luckmann’s *Social Construction of Reality* works as the starting point of this theoretical framework so that critical components of Butler’s work with gender identity formation are more reasonably situated within this analysis. Also, several ideas from each theory align with each other and enhance the discussion of gender identity.

2.2 Gender Identity Formation, Judith Butler

This investigation incorporates small portions of Butler’s work on gender to discuss how oppression results from mainstream society’s influence on identity formation. Butler argues that gender is socially constructed in a culturally normative society, and anything or anyone outside a predetermined binary—reinforced by “a series of cultural inferences”—relinquishes access to cultural intelligibility (100). The dominant body in a given society seizes misappropriated control over everyone outside the relevant binary structure, and all culturally unintelligible individuals assume a marginalized societal position. A culturally normative society is one that depends on the consensus of the dominant members in the social order to establish the acceptable practices within that space. For example, Butler argues that homosexuality and all sexual acts in accordance with same-sex attraction are suppressed in a normative society. In this instance, normalized behaviors are represented by a heteronormative culture in which the acceptable

¹¹ Berger and Luckmann state that an individual is “conscious of the world as consisting of multiple realities” (35).

¹² For more about normalized behaviors in relation to constructed realities, see Berger and Luckmann pages 37-40.

practices within romance are governed by a male/female binary (100). She states that the components of a binary “make sense only with reference to a mediating boundary that strives for stability” that “is determined in large part by cultural orders that sanction the subject and compel its differentiation from the abject” (108). This behavior is known as cultural policing. The summation of this concept is reflected in the universal notion that little girls like the color pink, and little boys like the color blue: this is the cultural inference. So, if a female child happens to like blue, society will contend that she is not a “normal” little girl. This instance seems extreme, but it exemplifies the crux of Butler’s argument: society only allows for that which it deems acceptable within the parameters it sets forth. While Berger and Luckmann discuss this concept in terms of individuals’ personal determinations of “here and now,” Butler asserts that how individuals operate within their “here and now” depends on the approval of the most influential members of a given society.

In a manner similar to Berger and Luckmann’s analysis of reality, Butler maintains that how we interpret and interact within reality depends on our proximity to the temporality and physical space in which behaviors occur. However, her argument shifts away from Berger and Luckmann’s model concerning how the symbols responsible for denoting gender are affected by consideration of the stability of “reality” in relation to performativity. Butler describes how performativity complicates naturalized gender classifications by calling into question the gender binaries that, according to mainstream society, inherently exist; she also works to restructure perceptions of reality. By using drag as her example of gender performance, she details that when we see “a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man...the gender that is introduced through simile lacks ‘reality’ and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance” (100). Drag obscures our perceptions of reality by troubling the borders that restrict movement within

and between gender categories. That which normally persists as the true iteration of “man” or “woman” collapses, as the performance demonstrates how gender can be learned (versus an innate, internalized understanding of its features). Butler also suggests that acknowledging individuals—and all iterations of their behavior—outside the binary collapses both the binary and, subsequently, the power structure established by those in power in the society. When the foundation of power structures unravels, boundaries shift, identities destabilize, and notions of reality transform. Berger and Luckmann stop short of allowing space for fluidity in the formation of reality by stating that disruptive occurrences within everyday life are mitigated by the normalized behavior routines that individuals use to construct their realities. My analysis requires Butler’s obscuring of reality, inasmuch as it helps create fertile terrain for exploring reality in *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. However, my argument explicitly positions race next to class and performance in a way that limits the application of Butler’s work with the theory of performativity within this analysis.

Butler suggests that although “racial presumptions invariably underwrite the discourse on gender,” simply exchanging one construct for the other within this structure undermines the struggles connected to each ideology because “race and gender ought not to be treated as simple analogies” (xvi). The *RHOA* housewives identify themselves as black women and do not separate their class status from their racial identities. I examine the intersection between these two socially constructed principles in an effort to explore “what happens to the theory [of performativity] when it tries to come to grips with race” (xvi). Nonetheless, when contextualized within Butler’s work regarding gender, the structure of class stratifications reflects similar concerns presented in these theoretical principles. Binaries, performance, cultural supervision, and identity all reference problematic features within societal representations of class and create

a necessity for investigating its configuration. In a manner similar to gender, class operates within a haves/have-nots binary which disregards anyone in the liminal space: those within each category police class in order to validate one's status within. If the "other" achieves coherence, the majority questions reality, its inherence, and the power that should result from the binary structure. When all these elements converge, the structure births an tyrannical social order that dictates who does what at any given moment. The manifestations of oppression and control that result from this Butler's use of the theory of performativity are what make her work useful in my analysis. Later in this work, I will discuss how this manifests in the *RHOA* castmates' behaviors on the show.

2.3 Representations of Black Women, Patricia Hill Collins

Now that the first two parts of the framework are established, the final piece comes from Patricia Hill Collins' study of traditional black female archetypes found in literature, television, film, and music. Her work details the lives and functions of five stereotypes: "mammy," "matriarch," "welfare mother," "jezebel," and "hoochie-mama." Like Butler, who questions the role power plays in the incessant ostracism of the "other," Hill Collins contends that "[b]ecause the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood" (Hill Collins 69). This notion connects Hill Collins with Butler by denoting the necessity for marginalization. "Othering" within a society requires a dominant majority that creates a hierarchical structure, positioning the majority at the top of the hierarchy. Butler describes societal hysteria as the general response to the country's AIDS epidemic, because the illness is established as "the 'gay disease'" (Butler 106). This compulsion reinforces heteronormative boundaries by rejecting gay sex, promoting homophobia, and privileging heterosexual relationships. Comparably, Hill Collins demonstrates equivalent

power-anxious models through classic black female archetypes. Goldman and Waymer build upon and expand these models through discussion of “physical attractiveness among black women,” “black ladies,” “sapphires, bitches, and angry black women,” “dizzy black women,” and “high class divas.”¹³ Upon close analysis of each archetypes appearance in and omission from *RHOA*, I will explore the central inquiry birthed from this theoretical framework: how, if at all, do these stereotypes truly influence the ways in which society views black women; and, how do those views affect the intricate realities that both viewers of the show and the castmates themselves inhabit?

Patricia Hill Collins’ study of traditional Black female archetypes found in literature, television, film, and music completes my theoretical framework. Her work details the lives and functions of five stereotypes: “mammy,” “matriarch,” “welfare mother,” “jezebel,” and “hoochie-mama.” Like Butler, who questions the role power plays in the incessant ostracism of the “other,” Hill Collins contends that “[b]ecause the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood” (69). This notion connects Hill Collins with Butler by denoting the necessity for marginalization. “Othering” within a society requires a dominant majority that creates a hierarchical structure and positions the majority at the top of that hierarchy. When something happens to shift the majority’s comfort within their hierarchy, social hysteria results. Butler describes societal hysteria as the general response to the country’s AIDS epidemic, because the illness is established as “the ‘gay disease’” (106). This compulsion reinforces heteronormative boundaries by promoting homophobia and privileging heterosexual relationships. It confines the negative behavior to the ostracized portion of the population. Comparably, Hill Collins

¹³ For Goldman and Waymer’s full evaluation of these archetypes, see Chapter 1 (27-36).

demonstrates equivalent power-anxious models through classic Black female archetypes. Goldman and Waymer build upon and expand these models through discussion of “physical attractiveness among Black women,” “Black ladies,” “sapphires, bitches, and angry Black women,” “dizzy Black women,” and “high class divas.”¹⁴ Upon close analysis of each archetypes’ appearance in and omission from *RHOA*, I explore the central inquiry birthed from this theoretical framework: how, if at all, do these stereotypes truly influence the ways in which society views Black women; and, how do those views affect the intricate realities that both viewers of the show and the castmates themselves inhabit?

2.4 Foundations: *RHOA* Structure and Development

Atlanta is the perfect locale for Bravo’s first predominantly-Black cast of housewives and is now considered an African American metropolis where Black people can thrive; but the city was not always friendly to this population, which accounts for fifty-four percent of its inhabitants (U.S. Census Bureau 1). The city’s transformation happened, in large part, as a response to the U.S. South’s contentious battle against the discriminatory practices that suppressed the political, social, and economic growth of the race. In 1973, Atlanta welcomed its first Black mayor, Maynard Holbrook Jackson, Jr., and the city’s economic upturn continued. By the end of the 1990s, Atlanta had played host city to the Olympic Games and was home to the nation’s busiest airport, Hartsfield Airport (now Hartsfield-Jackson Airport). Just six years shy of *RHOA*’s introduction, Atlanta citizens elected its first woman mayor, Shirley Franklin, and in 2002, women held public office in the following capacities: Police Chief Beverly Harvard, Sheriff Jackie Barrett, and City Council President Cathy Woolard. Not only does the history of

¹⁴ For Goldman and Waymer’s full evaluation of these archetypes, see Chapter 1 (27-36).

Georgia's capital city show that African Americans have access to high-power public positions, but also Atlanta presents opportunities for Black women to operate in significant public spaces.

To boost the show's relevance as a viable text for analysis, I want to briefly dissect *RHOA*'s viewer ratings. The chart below breaks down public reception of the franchise based on an average of each season's number of episodes.¹⁵ I have also quantified each season's reunion episodes to expand the discussion of the show's popularity:

Table 1 "Real Housewives Viewership"

| | Number of Episodes | Viewer Ratings (million) | Reunion Episodes |
|----------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| Season 1 | 8 | 1.5 | 1 |
| Season 2 | 14 | 2.8 | 1 |
| Season 3 | 18 | 2.9 | 2 |
| Season 4 | 23 | 2.9 | 3 |
| Season 5 | 23 | 3.1 | 3 |
| Season 6 | 25 | 3.9 | 3 |
| Season 7 | 25 | 3.2 | 3 |
| Season 8 | 20 | 2.9 | 3 |
| Season 9 | 24 | 2.6 | 4 |

Of Bravo's *Housewives* franchise, *RHOA* has long been the network's most popular installment, averaging 1.5 million viewers during its first season.¹⁶ Through the first four seasons, *RHOA* viewership steadily increased and reached an average 3 million viewers by the end of Season 5.

¹⁵ Some, but not all seasons include behind-the-scenes episodes that I excluded from my calculations.

¹⁶ The "Reunion Special" earned the season's highest ratings at 2.82 million viewers ("*RHOA* TV Ratings" 12).

The Season 3 Finale “The Bride and the Doom” represents the first episode to reach over 4 million viewers (4.4), and the Season 7 premiere “Bye Bye & Bon Voyage” earned 5.6 million viewers. At the end of 2016, Bravo ranked number one among ad-supported cable networks, and *RHOA* landed among the list of the fifteen most popular reality series of the year. Additionally, on Sunday May 7, 2017, the fourth part of *RHOA*’s Season 9 reunion special ranked third among broadcasts that night, boasting 3.1 million viewers (only behind two NBA playoff games, which represent a special event occurring only once every year). The show’s popularity is unquestionable, and to make a comparison, the franchise’s other 2008 spin-off, *The Real Housewives of New York City*, averaged only 229,000 viewers in its first season and 1.6 million viewers in its second season. As a response to the show’s public reception, Bravo extended the duration of each season and the number of reunion episodes that close out each season.

The reunion episodes are important because they help explain the complexity in the docusoap’s composition of reality. Reunion episodes bring the castmates together to reflect on the season’s events and respond to questions from viewers and from the reunion episode host Andy Cohen.¹⁷ Cohen asks the women questions, and producers usually pull footage from the season to contextualize the inquiries (but not particularly in that order). Dominquez suggests that “the docusoap genre works by offering dis-orienting and anxiety-inducing explosions of affect that are then followed by cathartic discussions of emotion (focused on understanding the previous outbursts), creating for viewers a sense of connection with the program and its cast through their ability to witness these moments of intimate discord, whether between kin or friends” (159). And, because the genre blends a number of realities together, authenticity plays a smaller role in this audience/castmate connection.

¹⁷ Cohen is the *Real Housewives* creator and executive producer, and moderates the reunion episode conversations.

Reunion episodes combine the reality created within each episode with the reality of the reunion itself, and these overlap with each reality presented by each *housewife*. This exchange allows the women to perform as viewers while remaining participants of the show. Butler calls this “an ostensible reality...coupled with an unreality,” making us, “think we know what reality is” (100). In this instance, the women as castmates represent the “ostensible reality,” because viewers see the women on the show each week; their position as viewers during the reunion becomes the “unreality” because it contradicts what audience members understand to be true (the women are members of the show). Therefore, the reunion specials complicate perceptions of reality because the *housewives*, whom the viewing public accept as castmates on the show, simultaneously occupy two distinct roles—roles that would otherwise exist in separate parts of this participant/viewer binary. Moreover, their dual identities within the reunion episodes expose the limitations resulting from normalized behavior. If viewers believe that the women can only be castmates, it denies the *housewives* any mobility within their reality.

Essentially, viewers decide the castmates’ position in relation to the show and restrict movement into and out of other categories. Most importantly, this structure establishes that “reality is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be,” resulting, as with gender, in an alternative to the normalized lens through which we understand ideologies concerning the construction of reality (101). Because viewers see the women’s dual roles as cast members and viewers during the reunion episodes, viewers experience a new iteration of reality within their preexisting “here and now.” Reality’s original paradigm shifts and opens a space where the new behavior can exist. This concept is important when configuring *RHOA* castmates’ positionality in class groups because the relationship between performance and reality ultimately represents a collective resistance to universal definitions of traditional archetypes reserved for Black women.

The intersection between race and class on the show provides a liminal space that recognizes alternative iterations of class behaviors and challenges the status quo.

The breakdown of reunion specials segues into discussion concerning how the character-viewer relationship provokes the policing of class boundaries. Butler describes scholarly and academic reception of her work by acknowledging misconceptions applied to the public's ability to synthesize complex information. She writes:

The surprise over [her text's reception] is perhaps attributable to the way we understand the reading public, its capacity and desire for reading complicated and challenging texts, when the complication is not gratuitous, when the challenge is in the service of calling taken-for-granted truths into question, when the taken for grantedness of those truths is, indeed, oppressive. (97)

Butler suggests that not only does the public's sophistication exceed collective expectations but also that the crux of this misconception attempts to redirect attention away from the oppression embedded in gender regulation. Assuming that people simply fail to understand how the things they encounter react to and rub against their position in society creates a greater opportunity for perpetuating the behaviors that reinforce discriminatory and prejudicial ideologies.

Pop culture-based news outlet TMZ ran a story in 2015 on NeNe Leake's acquisition of a \$2.1million mansion located in the Gwinnett County suburb Sugarloaf. An unknown reader commented that "[t]hose who are rich (i.e. not the kind that just pretend to be on TV) pay for their homes in full" ("Guest" TMZ.com). This viewer's comment provides a crucial observation that directly relates to cultural iterations and class management: Leake is accused of performing class because she made a down payment on her mansion instead of completing the transaction when she decided to buy her home. Furthermore, the idea that rich people behave in certain

ways—“paying for their homes in full”—suggests that an individual who opts to operate outside this parameter performs class and should not be recognized as a rich person. When viewed through the haves/have-nots binary, this class iteration attempts to deny Leakes cultural intelligibility and exclude her from upper class society because she did not follow the prescribed method for a wealthy individual to obtain a home. But, because Leakes neither moved from her home nor purchased it outright, she resists the reader’s attempt to exclude her from high society. Leakes’ indirect response works as resistance to class policing because it shifts her into the liminal space within the binary. From here, Leakes can move away from mainstream society’s expectations of rich housewives and present her alternative version of the trope. These questions of wealth and social class breed an interrogation of the women themselves. What is a housewife, and does Bravo create/present her accurately?

An erroneous assumption stemming from the show’s title suggests that the castmates are all, in fact, married. A housewife is a typically married woman whose main responsibilities include managing her household by tending to her children, supporting her husband, and performing domestic tasks. Lee and Moscovitz suggest that note that “[t]hese so-called ‘real housewives’ live lives most would find surreal, and none are actual housewives” (68). *RHOA* Season 1 featured five women: DeShawn Snow, NeNe Leakes, Lisa Wu Hartwell, Kim Zolciak, and Shereé Whitfield. Snow, Leakes, and Hartwell were married; Whitfield battled a contentious divorce, and Zolciak was—as later revealed—the mistress of an unknown celebrity. Snow, Hartwell, and Whitfield married sports icons (Eric Snow [NBA], Ed Hartwell [NFL], and Bob Whitfield [NFL], respectively), while NeNe married Gregg Leakes, an Atlanta real estate tycoon. Leakes, Snow, and Hartwell, exclusively based on their marital status, most closely fit the housewife role. Whitfield and Zolciak occupy a liminal space because the former is only legally

married—she and her estranged husband live separately—and the latter is not married. However, they still don the housewife moniker on the show. They are identified by society as members of this group despite the fact that they lack some of the housewife credentials. But, what they lack in terms of the housewife’s traditional definition they make up for by behaving like Bravo *housewives*.

Season 1 opens with scenes of these four women in the normal Bravo housewife’s routine: shopping with girlfriends, en route to an exclusive party, or on the phone discussing the makings of their next entrepreneurial scheme. These images help align the women with society’s expectations of the wealthy, but, as Lee and Moscovitz purport, viewers see the women “[i]n failed quests to perform the public role of esteemed aristocrats” (65). This assertion implies that a cultural iteration, “esteemed aristocrat,” should emerge within the *housewives*’ behavior, but it does not fully develop. DeShawn and Whitfield organize elaborate galas for the sake of financial gain: Snow hopes to raise \$1 million for her non-profit organization and Whitfield believes the launch party for her clothing line *She by Shereé* will position her above Atlanta’s popular designers and among global fashion icons. Though each woman demands that Atlanta’s “Who’s Who” be in attendance at their events, the guest lists always include no-name locals who want camera time and their *RHOA* castmates. By the time their parties end, viewers see a glorified version of an adolescent after party: too many drinks, competing egos, and feigned attempts to “play nice” with “frienemies.” However, the *housewives* continue hosting events and requesting celebrity guest lists.

Black women cast as Bravo housewives demonstrates how the intersectionality between race and class requires a combination of multiple theoretical perspectives. The social construction of reality changes reality’s configuration on *RHOA* by presenting a structure that

accounts for the subjectivity viewers, cast members, and producers deposit into reading the show as a culturally influential text. The theory of performativity lends itself to my analysis of class performance because it destabilizes traditional definitions of class by acknowledging that within a liminal space, alternatives to typical upper-class behavior effectively represent that which they disrupt. Because the *RHOA* housewives present altered manifestations of traditional stereotypes of Black women, they introduce the idea that marginalized groups can challenge the social hierarchy. These women defy societal norms through their iterations of wealth and class, and because viewers continuously recognize the *housewives* as elite members of society, the women persist as nuanced models of the housewife archetype and maintain cultural intelligibility. And people keep attending their parties.

3 “IN ATLANTA, MONEY AND CLASS DO GIVE YOU POWER”: SHOW CRITIQUE AND PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

3.1 Mammies, Matriarchs, and Public Images of Black Women

Archetypes play a significant role in my analysis because they represent what I consider the result of unchecked cultural iterations. Specifically, the long-standing white patriarchal societal order created public images of Black women that misrepresent our femininity and limit our social mobility. Trudier Harris describes the complexity of Black women’s identities:

Called Matriarch, Emasculator and Hot Momma. Sometimes Sister, Pretty Baby, Auntie, Mammy and Girl. Called Unwed Mother, Welfare Recipient and Inner City Consumer. The Black American Woman has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even to herself” (4).

As implied through the monikers listed above, Black women not only function in complex roles but also society asks them to exist in those roles without little concern for how they feel about them. These labels fuel historical perceptions of Black women footed in the idea that we are incompetent about womanhood and ill-equipped to function effectively as wives and mothers. Moreover, Black women are consistently placed in comparative binaries with white women and other women of color. Goldman and Waymer discuss beauty standards among African American women in reality television through a comparative lens, stating that though definitions of beauty vary based on culture, “beauty standards for Black people (as well as other groups) are often based on Eurocentric ideals” (29). Eurocentric beauty standards include straight, blonde hair, blue eyes, fair skin, slender physiques, and small facial features (e.g. noses and lips). The binary, though it offers a space for characteristics and features that do not align with leading beauty

images, places all opposing iterations of beauty in a recessive position because it does not value the “other.” Additionally, this process promotes division and hierarchy because the binary categories rely on difference to enforce their meaning. Hill Collins identifies the problematic nature of this structure by linking human difference to objectification:

One part is not simply different from its counterpart; it is inherently opposed to its ‘other.’ Whites and Black...are fundamentally different entities related only through their definition as opposites... [and objectification] is central to this process of oppositional difference [because in] binary thinking, one element is objectified as Other and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled. (70)

At one point in history, many considered any image of Black women in television, literature, or film a response to the need for diversity in these mediums, regardless of what the image said about Black women. However, once society at large came to know Black women through the repeated images of mammies, jezebels, and other negative stereotypes, the dominant sector began using these representations to dictate how Black women fit into the cultural fabric.

Though the images originally outlined by Hill Collins provide much room for analysis, I focus on the mammy and her evolution. The mammy figure emerges as a result of post-slavery efforts to perpetuate Black female oppression on behalf of white hegemonic objectives. She contradicts antebellum womanhood—epitomized by “the cult of true womanhood’s” four distinct requirements: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness—but she coexists within society because of her “faithful, obedient domestic [service]” (72). Asexual and unattractive, mammies devote their lives to maintaining order within white households under the direction of their mistresses. This role becomes imperative to power structures, because “[e]mploying Black

women in mammified occupations supports the racial superiority of White employers... [and encourages] middle-class White women...to identify more closely with the racial and class privilege afforded their fathers, husbands, and sons” (73). The mammy is also juxtaposed against white women, which reinforces white superiority and strengthens the role of “Other” within this binary. It ultimately perpetuates the oppressive nature of binaries. But, the structure can unravel.

The Atlanta *housewives*, by no means, work as domestic servants to white families, which positions them outside this model, but their employment by a predominantly white executive board at Bravo/NBCUniversal Cable Entertainment (with women comprising over sixty percent of its membership) complicates this conclusion (“Executive Bios”). The two separate elements of the genre, “documentary” and “soap opera,” not only disrupt perceptions of reality, but they also represent performance. Rather than representing a stable reality, the docusoap should be considered a genre that simply mimics what mainstream society considers real because it includes intentionally fictional elements. When the docusoap converges with the mammy archetype, it places the characters in a liminal space that combines the housewife and the mammy into one model. This alternative characterization exemplifies an effort to resist societal regulations of class by providing a new archetype and rejecting the social hierarchical structure. Combining this perspective with *RHOA*’s popularity helps illuminate the importance of this representation because it validates the women’s identities and provides them cultural intelligibility. Although the housewives are technically outside society’s expectations in this newfound identity, they remain relevant and their identities are universally recognized.

Goldman and Waymer complicate the mammy figure through her relationship to the “Black Lady.” They contend that the Black Lady represents ambitious, professional women who still remain loyal to white people and who use aggression to gain economic success. Also, “she is

no longer asexual, like the original Mammy, but she still is presented as using her sexuality appropriately” (31). Many of the housewives possess these characteristics, but Leakes gives the best example of this model. During the Season 1 reunion special, Cohen asks Leakes about her growing popularity among viewers. After he tells her that CNN news anchor and host Anderson Cooper commented on how much he loves her, Leakes states that she is not surprised that people love her and that she loves him and his work (“Reunion Special” 3:23). Her assertion implies that she values the opinion of a highly-successful, internationally recognized news anchor, and she connects herself to him by reciprocating the love Cooper extended to her. Leakes combines aggression and sexuality in Season 2 by organizing an alter ego photoshoot. She decides to portray a housewife and a stripper to address rumors that she once danced to support herself and first son. As director of the shoot, Leakes takes the spotlight. The photoshoot and surrounding drama stretches across three episodes, with Leakes’ sass growing in each. Castmate Kandi Burruss comments on how Leakes “was really bossy at the beginning of the shoot” (“My Ego” 13:24). However, the tactic pays off. The first two episodes of this series, episodes five and six, brought in 2.5 and 3.1 million viewers, respectively. Though still problematic, Leakes’ representation of this model shows how she subverts a negative portrayal, makes it popular, and reaps the economic benefits that result. And most importantly, Leakes’ bossy attitude and atypical sexuality within this model exemplify the manner in which alternative depictions of Black women provide agency for us within mainstream society. Though members of the Black community may critique her behavior as a misrepresentation of true Black womanhood, people from other ethnic backgrounds, who make up thirty-five percent of the show’s viewers, watch *RHOA*, thus validating this performance and suggesting an appeal of Black Lady stereotype among non-Black viewers (“For Us By Us?” np).

If the mammy represents a “good mother” in mainstream society, her successor, the “matriarch,” embodies characteristics that make her undesirable by and unrecognized within both mainstream and Black culture. Daniel Patrick Moynihan presents the Black Matriarch during the 1960s as an example of “the bad mother” who “failed to fulfill [her] traditional womanly duties at home” (30). At the expense of patriarchy, these women typically adorn the “head of household” moniker and carry familial responsibilities alone. Because they support single-parent homes, they also bear the household’s financial responsibility. In connection with Moynihan’s suggestion, Hill Collins asserts that Black Matriarchs also are usually “overly aggressive, unfeminine women” who “allegedly [emasculate] their lovers and husbands” (75). The Black Matriarch creates a complicated dynamic for the *RHOA* housewives, as none of the Atlanta housewives neatly represent this archetype. From Season 1, Hartwell and Snow’s husbands provide their incomes from employment with the NFL and NBA, respectively, but each wife work. The former operates a non-profit organization, and the latter—in partnership with her husband—sells high-dollar real estate to Atlanta’s elite. In later seasons, Hartwell pursues entrepreneurial endeavors in jewelry-making and fashion design. Leakes’ employment is most ambiguous during Season 1, but she typifies some behaviors described by Hill Collins, insomuch as her demeanor is often “overly aggressive” and appears to emasculate her husband (75). During her Season 1 introduction, Leakes and her husband attend multiple events, but she takes the spotlight: Mr. Leakes is always pictured behind her, with his head down, or waiting to engage others upon his wife’s approval. However, Mr. Leakes’ work as a real estate agent provides the major financial support for the Leakes’ household during the early seasons of the show. Once NeNe Leakes appears on *The Celebrity Apprentice* (2008-2015), her income dramatically increases, and her current net worth equals twelve million dollars (“NeNe Leakes

Net Worth” np). Leakes’ appearance on NBC’s show also correlates to a boost in *RHOA* viewers. Leakes appeared on *The Celebrity Apprentice* toward the end of *RHOA* Season 4. After finishing that season with an average 2.9 million viewers, Season 5 opened with 3.2 million viewers and averaged 3.1 million viewers over twenty-three episodes. Leakes’ position makes a strong case for further investigation into the *housewives*’ manipulation of their representation on the show.

Kim Zolciak and Shereé Whitfield, as the two unmarried housewives, fit this model most appropriately. Neither have men living in their homes, and each woman is responsible for all household upkeep and the care of their children.¹⁸ Whitfield and Zolciak, however, both depend on financial assistance from men. Zolciak’s not-quite-divorced anonymous boyfriend finances her life, and Whitfield’s ex-NFL and (at the time) soon-to-be ex-husband provides economic security for her and their children. Zolciak talks about plans to start an upscale line of women’s wigs, and Whitfield drains thousands of dollars trying to launch *She by Shereé*. The interplay between the characteristics of housewife and matriarch presents these two women as culturally viable iterations of high-class status. They resist society’s attempt to place them in a category by blending elements from each archetype. However, Kim Zolciak inhabits a complicated position on the show as the only white *RHOA* housewife. She is the exception to the rules, and my discussion will later address her positionality on the show and in society.

During Season 1, Whitfield admits that she hopes to gain some seven figures in financial support from her spouse. Though technically she represents a Black matriarch, she can also be seen as either a “Gold Digger” or a “Baby Mama.” Goldman and Waymer identify the Gold Digger as a woman who “enjoys engaging in promiscuous behavior to obtain financial security

¹⁸ Whitfield, during Season 1, is battling her husband in divorce court.

and material gain,” and they define the Baby Mama as a woman who “becomes a mother as a result of her hypersexuality. [She is] unethical, as she often lies to the father of her children...[and she] is usually a ‘young, single, poor, urban [female]’” (33-34). These stereotypes alone present issues, as their definitions include subjective evaluations of a woman’s intentions. I understand that interpreting behaviors can help connect the motives behind an individual’s actions, but I stop short of suggesting that anyone can determine a woman’s reason for mothering children without confirmation from that woman. As pointed out by Berger and Luckmann, individuals’ realities are the combination of each person’s here and now in relation to the here and now of surrounding individuals. Therefore, based on an inability to decode Whitfield’s actions behind and rationale for having children with her ex-football player ex-husband, I will not consider her a Baby Mama or a Gold Digger. Moreover, she is not represented as young, poor, or urban on *RHOA*. However, the other factors disrupt this perspective. Shereé states during Season 1, Episode 1 that she “grew up middle-class, and now [she’s] upper-class,” and she has no plans of altering her lifestyle or her children’s lifestyle (“Welcome” 2:01). In a move that defies society’s definition of the Black Matriarch, Whitfield informs viewers that her intentions are motivated by the stability of her family and not a selfish, individualistic aim. This allows Whitfield the opportunity to redefine public perception of her and her castmates by providing an alternative to the status quo.

3.2 The Rich Bitch and Her Friends

Lee and Moscovitz present another archetype, the “rich bitch,” to outline how the link between class, race, and gender produces a villainous character simultaneously loved and hated within society:

Sacrificing motherhood, empathy, and altruism, the rich bitch, a bourgeois feminine character done up as a cartoonish trope, pursues selfish material gains single-mindedly. Always gendered (female), always classed (leisure), and almost always racialized (white), she functions at a cultural crossroads where class antagonisms can be articulated and traditional gender roles can be reasserted. The figure of the rich bitch fuels class-based contempt by reinforcing anti-feminist tropes. (65)

The rich bitch, like the Black Matriarch, Gold Digger, and Baby Mama, embodies characteristics that contradict the traditional housewife role; the factors that motivate her behaviors stem from a one-track desire for power and visibility through her tangible wealth. The rich bitch is consumed by pursuits that reinforce her status as an elite member of society. Moreover, she allows her preoccupation with class to influence her parenting. Not only are her failures as a mother characterized by “absenteeism or substitution shoe shopping for emotional intimacy,” but also her class anxieties produce one-dimensional, egotistical children instead of “worldly, learned adults” (77). Society rejects the rich bitch because she fails to fit the good mother/bad mother binary. As the only white woman on *RHOA*, Kim Zolciak denotes the biggest anomaly among *RHOA* castmates because her status as a white woman eliminates her from any of the stereotypes mentioned prior to the rich bitch. Based on the link between society’s iteration of womanhood and the privilege afforded her through her race, Zolciak is, most obviously, excluded from descriptions of Black womanhood. This connection eclipses attempts to position Zolciak alongside her counterparts on the show and positions her outside the coalition created by the other women’s collective resistance against society’s classed exclusionary practices.

Zolciak fits the rich bitch trope for several reasons, but she also exhibits behavior typical of the Gold Digger. First, she establishes during Season 1 that she wants to be friends with her children, favoring a casual relationship with them over the strict, authoritative demeanor typical of Black mothers (“Welcome” 8:48). Zolciak employs a nanny for her two daughters, Brielle and Ariana, and an assistant, Myleik, despite the fact that she discloses her position as a kept woman. The nanny often cares for Zolciak’s children while she goes shopping, meets friends for afternoon drinks, or when she attends the events hosted by her castmates. Next, she proudly expresses her obsession with tangible wealth, boasting, “I’m very materialistic. It makes me feel good to have name brands and top-of-the-line. I don’t want anything else. I could die tomorrow,” laughing, “[but] I want to die in Dior” (“Welcome” 4:17). In the same episode, viewers watch Zolciak hemorrhage cash at Atlanta’s Phipps Plaza, and then see her leave a car dealership with a fully-loaded Cadillac Escalade, all at the expense of her boyfriend, Big Poppa. To reinforce her status as the rich bitch of the *RHOA* cast, she passes the values to her children. During Season 2 Episode 2, Zolciak shares with her friend Cori that she spent \$18,000 on a 12-person sleepover for her eleven-year-old daughter. Ironically, after viewers see shots from the birthday party, the scene moves to Zolciak and her friend having drinks in the hotel lobby, where Zolciak laments her daughter’s minimal excitement about the party. Cori says, “We spoil our kids. Our parents grew up middle class, and I had to work hard for everything. Kids now-a-days are handed everything” (“It’s My Party” 14:45). This segment of the show ends with Brielle receiving a Louis Vuitton handbag and Zolciak’s declaration that though her kids are brats, she wouldn’t change anything about the way she raises them. She typifies rich bitch behavior, but her position as the white minority on the predominantly Black show provides her agency to maneuver around

the white housewife's cultural iteration presented through the rich bitch. However, race complicates this notion of agency and requires further analysis of Zolciak's role on the show.

Mainstream society often highlights advances in racial discrimination through examples of "The First Black _____:" the Black Bachelorette, the first Black president, or the first Black actor to win an Academy Award. The assertions attempt to demonstrate how recognition of Black people in roles traditionally reserved for or awarded to white people justifies ideologies that support a supposed post-racial society. Actually, this reasoning unintentionally reinforces racial division by attaching the accomplishment to an individual's physical appearance; these instances undermine equality at the expense of real progress. Warner talks of this phenomenon as "colorblind TV casting," in which actors earn roles based on their qualifications for a part separate from their physical racial markings (*Cultural Politics* xii). So, how does the only white *RHOA* castmate land the job? And, how does she differ from her co-stars? Warner suggests that "the effects of colorblindness can be better understood as a means of marginalizing and undermining the experiences of minorities in American society" (*Cultural Politics* 25). By casting people of color exclusively for the sake of diversity, casting directors and producers perpetuate the prejudices they seek to redress. If viewed as an inverted approach to colorblind casting, Kim Zolciak's role on *RHOA* presents the belief that a white woman can come along with a group of Black women, be recognized as a member of the group, and successfully achieve cultural intelligibility within their social reality without compromising her whiteness or her position as a *housewife*. However, Zolciak's character development and her life after the show demonstrate how racial privilege protects her from societal marginalization and isolates her from the other *RHOA* castmates.

During Season 1, Zolciak consistently states that she feels comfortable as the only white woman in the *RHOA* group. She tells Whitfield that because they are both beautiful and have so much in common, Whitfield is the Black version of Kim (“Out of Tune” 38:01). Historically, as Hill Collins points out, Black and white women have participated in the same struggle but from different vantage points. She states that when white women challenged the status quo by entering the workforce, and subsequently abandoning their families, society accepted this shift more easily than the Black working woman because she personifies aggression and dominance that the most macho white woman can never represent (77). Based on this premise, Whitfield cannot be Zolciak’s Black equivalent, because society’s expectations deny Whitfield the intelligibility Zolciak enjoys. Moreover, Zolciak is often presented as the sympathetic white woman. In Season 2 Episode 3, she trips and falls down a flight of stairs during the alter ego photo shoot reveal and severely injures her ankle. To the chagrin of her castmates, security guards carry her from the car to the house and back outside, and this event moves the spotlight from Leakes, who organized and hosted the party. Rather than managing the crowd and ensuring the safety of the entire group, the hired staff abandons the rest of the women to assist Zolciak; her whiteness is prioritized and deemed more valuable.

By the start of Season 2, Zolciak and Whitfield are no longer friends, Hartwell and Zolciak have not exchanged words since their Season 2 reunion explosion, and Zolciak seeks a bestie replacement in the show’s newcomer Kandi Burrese. Zolciak aligns herself with Burrese using the same rhetoric she used in her relationship with Whitfield: “We have so much in common,” “We are so much alike,” “She’s so beautiful” (“Home” 12:01). When Leakes and Whitfield find out about this, they unite to put Zolciak back in her place: from here, Zolciak begins distancing herself from the group, and she becomes uncomfortable with Blackness. This

distancing manifests itself most apparently leading up to the alter ego photo shoot. Leakes asks Zolciak to pose as a Black woman, and she rejects Leakes' suggestion. Leakes shows contempt for her response by reminding Hartwell that, "she was running around talking about, 'Shereé is my twin! We look just alike.' I don't know what the problem is now!" ("Home" 22:57). NeNe highlights a commodification of Blackness that Hill Collins argues is the foundation of capitalistic greed, and Zolciak's quick transition out of colorblind equality into an intentional recognition of racial difference suggests that she can take up and put down her identity within the *RHOA* cast at her convenience without losing cultural intelligibility (79). Zolciak still earns her Bravo checks, still shops in high-end boutiques, and she still socializes in the circles common amongst the *RHOA* women. After the show, she moved on to achieve what society would accept as legitimate housewife status: she married a professional football player, had children with him, and entered into a world of celebrity and luxury she only hoped to achieve through *RHOA*. Despite her portrayal on the show, mainstream society welcomed Kim Zolciak-Biermann into the upper class. So not only are the Black *RHOA* housewives working to resist society's attempts to restrict class-related social mobility, but the women also must face the reality of their status as Black women on a show within a society more forgiving of white women's transgressions against social norms.

4 “I SAID WHAT I SAID!”: CONCLUSION

According to Goldman and Waymer, traditional Black female archetypes negatively impact Black women’s identities because white patriarchal values deem the stereotypes defiant characters whose work outside the home is detrimental to their children and contrary to traditional gender roles (34). Black women are traditionally excluded from recognition within positive examples of femininity. The Cult of True Womanhood, though it outlines a woman’s role as a steadfast domestic engineer, denies Black women the opportunity to live up to its standard. At the time society outlined these rules, the majority of America’s Black women lived in bondage and were not considered human. Therefore, the rules stop short of characterizing Black women’s domestic responsibilities. Further, though society advanced and began recognizing Black women in a limited number of spaces, they still fail to enjoy a fair, benevolent place among their counterparts. So, the question resulting from this perspective requires deeper thought about how, exactly, Black women are judged by a standard that refuses to allow them representation within it?

“The Joneses” once epitomized wealth and high-class status in this country, and anyone who successfully copied the behaviors associated with the Joneses’ positionality earned a spot at the top of the class hierarchy. But, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* exemplify the manner in which performance can rearrange social order. Through this project, I attempt to highlight the implications behind cultural performance by focusing on one show and specific iterations of repressive Black female archetypes. Though reality television captivated mainstream culture during the early 1990s beginning with MTV’s *The Real World* (1992-2013), this work takes a specific interest in the complexity surrounding the commodification of reality and culture in the docusoap genre. And I hope to ignite revived, alternative discussions about both reality and

culture in the specific context of performance, instability, and resistance. While I cover the points from each component of my theoretical framework that most closely relate to the purpose of this project, each piece of scholarship represented in my study remains ripe with unanswered questions that can expand the work I present here.

Berger and Luckmann's theory on the social construction of reality challenges the longstanding idea associated with reality television. While its title suggests to audiences that what they consume is unscripted, uninterrupted truth, the relationship between individuals' perceptions of temporality and physical proximity to each other unravels preconceived notions about these shows' validity as "reality." My analysis details the methodologies presented by Berger and Luckmann that justify their claim that reality is socially constructed. The "here and now" that shapes individual perceptions of reality shifts based on each person's immediate relationship with other people in their environment. Also, face-to-face interactions take on greater meaning when contextualized within a socially constructed reality, because what individuals accept as reality when isolated from others changes when they engage with others. Berger and Luckmann invite scholars to consider the importance of everyday life when handling what they call "the theoretical formulation of reality," because where overemphasis on intellectualized thought fails the layman, attention to what is most tangible for each individual trumps scholarly pursuits to codify reality (27). By using examples of the *RHOA* castmates' behaviors on the show, I hope to have helped redirect existing ideas about the validity of reality television docusoap narratives.

Using Judith Butler's work to investigate societal policing of class structures presents limitations that require further examination. My analysis isolates performance as a means to establish a model for cultural regulation of social constructs, specifically rules for entrance into

upper-class society, with the preservation of power underpinning my argument. Though individuals may navigate class as a social construct—exemplified by the way economics allows us to move into and out of different class groups— but we use certain criteria (like physical appearance and tangible wealth) to restrict and exclude access to different social classes. Butler details the power of performance through the development of “naturalized knowledge,” relaying that “even though it is based on a series of [highly erroneous] cultural inferences,” we judge our realities based on superficial aesthetics (100). Two instances I highlight to discuss this idea superficially penetrate the question of docusoap’s influence on socially normalized behavior. First, qualifying the docusoap genre as an unreality—exemplified through blending fact-based documentaries with fictional soap operas—roots performativity’s interrogation in uncertainty and destabilizes its boundaries. Though my brief discussion about viewer responses to the *housewives*’ behaviors articulates the relationship between outward performance and cultural intelligibility, more work dedicated to the complexity of this relationship may better emphasize the need for continued advances in social equality for Black women in elite social stratifications.

However, when the Atlanta *housewives* “perform” class, they show how fragility disrupts societal attempts to exclude them from upper-class social circles; they also threaten power structures by subverting the status quo. Because none of the women neatly fit into the predetermined roles for Black women in television, literature, and film, these women exist within liminal spaces. And specifically related to cultural iterations of wealth, the *housewives* should be marginalized: their money is new, they are Black women, and they fail to maintain the standard definition of “housewife” and “socialite.” Despite the contradictions, the *RHOA* castmates possess tangible wealth that justifies their upper-class status. The symbols displayed through their behavior mimic the lives of white women who have equal access to material wealth, but the

Atlanta *housewives*' behaviors symbolize more than class status. Because the women on the show consistently confront the intersections of race and class, their behaviors work to reject the conventions of social hierarchy. As Berger and Luckmann posit, "social order is a human product, or more precisely, an ongoing human production" (69). To answer questions of reality's validity connected to performed behavior and social positionality narrowly limits this conversation. My aim is to complicate indoctrinated ideologies about reality, behavior, and identity to further examine the relationship between the three.

The Real Housewives of Atlanta lends itself to feminist readings because of numerous intersections of race, gender, and class as a means to dismiss individuals from societal environments. Though I focused specific attention on Season 1, the subsequent seasons contain the same examples covered in this work: overt displays of tangible wealth, collective resistance to societal representations of class, internal and external attempts at cultural intelligibility, and pretentious catfights meant to entertain the show's audience. Debate within the Black community continues in relation to the examples of womanhood put forth by these women (who have come to represent Black women in Atlanta and beyond). Their roles, despite the validity of its reality, reflect Patricia Hill Collins' observation about "othering." She writes, "[marginalized individuals] are simultaneously essential for [society's] survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify boundaries. African-American women, by not belonging, emphasize the significance of belonging" (70). Black feminist work continues deconstructing the oppressive structures that mute our voices, challenge our perspectives, and minimize our contributions to society.

WORKS CITED

- Beck, Daniel, et al. "Factual Entertainment and Reality TV." *Communication Research Trends*, vol. 31, no. 2, June 2012, pp. 4-27.
- Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1967.
- "Bravo Media Finishes 2016 with the Largest On-Air and Digital Growth Among the Top 10 Ad Supported Cable Networks." *The Futon Critic*, 19 Dec. 2015, <http://www.thefutoncritic.com/ratings/2016/12/19/bravo-media-finishes-2016-with-the-largest-on-air-and-digital-growth-among-the-top-10-ad-supported-cable-networks-242412/20161219bravo02/>. Accessed 28 June 2017.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- Copple Smith, Erin. "'Affluencers' by Bravo: Defining an Audience through Cross-Promotion." *Popular Communication*, vol. 10, no. 4, Oct-Dec2012, p. 286.
- Cox, Nicole B. "Banking on Females: Bravo's Commodification of the Female Audience." *Communication, Culture & Critique*, vol. 8, no. 3, Sept. 2015, pp. 466-483.
- . and Jennifer M. Proffitt. "The Housewives' Guide to Better Living: Promoting Consumption on Bravo's the Real Housewives." *Communication, Culture & Critique*, vol. 5, no. 2, June 2012, p. 295.
- Dominguez, Pier. "I'm Very Rich, Bitch!": The Melodramatic Money Shot and the Excess of Racialized Gendered Affect in the Real Housewives Docusoaps." *Camera Obscura*, vol. 30, no. 88, Jan. 2015, p. 155.
- Essany, Michael. *Reality Check: The Business and Art of Producing Reality TV*. Focal Press, 2013.

“Executive Bios – Corporate.” *NBCUniversal Media Village*. NBCUniversal,
<http://www.nbcumv.com/corporate/executive-bios>.

Feuer, Jane. "'Quality' Reality and the Bravo Media Reality Series." *Camera Obscura*, vol. 30,
 no. 88, Jan. 2015, p. 185.

“For Us By Us? The Mainstream Appeal of Black Content.” *Nielsen*, 8 Feb. 2017,
[http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2017/for-us-by-us-the-mainstream-appeal-](http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2017/for-us-by-us-the-mainstream-appeal-of-black-content.html)
[of-black-content.html](http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2017/for-us-by-us-the-mainstream-appeal-of-black-content.html). Accessed 18 July 2017.

Gancarski, A.G. "Surreal Housewives: On Bravo's Hit Show, the Gender Roles Are as Artificial
 as the Spray-On Tans." *The American Conservative*, vol. 10, no. 4, April 2011, pp. 20-21.

Gates, Racquel. "Activating the Negative Image." *Television & New Media*, vol. 16, no. 7, Nov.
 2015, p. 616.

Grindstaf, Laura and Susan Murray. "Reality Celebrity: Branded Affect and the Emotion
 Economy." *Public Culture*, vol. 27, no. 1, Jan. 2015, p. 109.

Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, And The Politics Of
 Empowerment*. Routledge, 2000.

“Home is Where the Heartbreak Is.” *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, created by Scott Dunlop,
 performed by Lisa Hartwell, NeNe Leakes, DeShawn Snow, Kim Zolciak, and Shereé
 Whitfield, season 2, episode 5, Bravo and NBCUniversal Cable Entertainment, 2008.

“It’s My Party.” *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, created by Scott Dunlop, performed by Lisa
 Hartwell, NeNe Leakes, DeShawn Snow, Kim Zolciak, and Shereé Whitfield, season 1,
 episode 2, Bravo and NBCUniversal Cable Entertainment, 2008.

Lee, Michael J. and Leigh Moscovitz. "The 'Rich Bitch': Class and Gender on the Real Housewives of New York City." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, Feb. 2013, pp. 64-82.

Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. GPO, 1965.

"My Ego is Bigger Than Your Ego." *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, created by Scott Dunlop, performed by Lisa Hartwell, NeNe Leakes, DeShawn Snow, Kim Zolciak, and Shereé Whitfield, season 2, episode 6, Bravo and NBCUniversal Cable Entertainment, 2008.

Nayar, Kavita Ilona. "You Did(N't) Build That: Audience Reception of a Reality Television Star's Transformation from a Real Housewife to a Real Brand." *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 48, no. 1, Feb. 2015, pp. 3-16.

"NENE LEAKES I AM VERY RICH... Drops Wad On HUGE Georgia Mansion." *TMZ*, 17 March 2015. <http://www.tMZ.com/2015/03/17/nene-leakes-georgia-mansion-rich-money-real-housewives-of-atlanta/>. Accessed 23 March 2016.

"NeNe Leakes Net Worth." *Celebrity Net Worth*, n.d. <https://www.celebritynetworth.com/richest-celebrities/nene-leakes-net-worth/>. Accessed 19 July 2017.

"Out of Tune" *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, created by Scott Dunlop, performed by Lisa Hartwell, NeNe Leakes, DeShawn Snow, Kim Zolciak, and Shereé Whitfield, season 1, episode 5, Bravo and NBCUniversal Cable Entertainment, 2008.

Patches, Matt. "We're Living in the Age of the Movie Trailer Money Shot." *Vulture*. New York Magazine, 9 July 2013, <http://www.vulture.com/2013/07/brief-history-of-the-movie-trailer-money-shot.html>. Accessed 6 April 2017.

The Real Housewives of Atlanta. Bravo/NBC Universal Cable Entertainment. 7 October 2008 to 10 April 2015.

“*Real Housewives of Atlanta* TV Ratings.” *All Things Real Housewives*, n.d., <http://allthingsrh.com/rhoa-ratings/>. Accessed 20 June 2017.

“Reunion.” *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, created by Scott Dunlop, performed by Lisa Hartwell, NeNe Leakes, DeShawn Snow, Kim Zolciak, and Shereé Whitfield, season 1, episode 8, Bravo and NBCUniversal Cable Entertainment, 2008.

Squires, Lauren. "Class and Productive Avoidance in the Real Housewives Reunions." *Discourse, Context & Media*, vol. 6, 01 Dec. 2014, pp. 33-44.

United States of America. Census Bureau. “Quick Facts: Atlanta, Georgia.” Washington: GPO, 2017.

“UPDATED: SHOWBUZZDAILY’S Top 150 Sunday Cable Originals & Network Finals.” *ShowBuzzDaily*, 7 May 2017, <http://www.showbuzzdaily.com/articles/showbuzzdailys-top-150-sunday-cable-originals-network-finals-5-7-2017.html>. Accessed 3 July 2017.

Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Harcourt, 2004.

Warner, Kristen J. "They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless: Ratchetness, Reality Television, and Black Womanhood." *Camera Obscura*, vol. 30, no. 88, Jan. 2015, p. 129.

---. *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting*. Routledge, 2015.

Wayne, Michael L. "Guilty Pleasures and Cultural Legitimation: Exploring High-Status Reality TV in the Postnetwork Era." *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 48, no. 5, Oct. 2015, pp. 990-1009.

“Welcome One, Welcome ATL.” *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, created by Scott Dunlop, performed by Lisa Hartwell, NeNe Leakes, DeShawn Snow, Kim Zolciak, and Shereé Whitfield, season 1, episode 1, Bravo and NBCUniversal Cable Entertainment, 2008.

Whitaker, Charles. “Is ATLANTA the New Black Mecca?” *Ebony*, Mar. 2002, pp. 148-156.